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ABSTRACT

In 1990, the William Mitchell College of Law, a free-standing (not affiliated with a university) law school located in St. Paul, Minnesota, decided to initiate counseling services due to student initiatives and informal accounts of students' mental health. The process involved in establishing counseling services at William Mitchell is described in this paper. A formal inquiry, which assessed the need for counseling services, found that 50% of students surveyed would use such a service. The school then launched the service, drawing on independent contractors so as to keep expenses down. The initial goals involved publicity and assuring students and staff of confidentiality. The service was tailored to meet the special needs of law students, and emphasized issues such as test anxiety. After a four-year period, use of the service leveled off to 4-5% of students--some staff members, but no faculty, also took advantage of the service. Over time, the counseling center evolved to focus on student needs, particularly towards the end of each semester when demand was greatest. The center also provided programs to help students become aware of the psychological stresses associated with law school. Of those using the center, 70% of students gave high ratings for the service they received. (RJM)

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A COUNSELING CLINIC IN A FREE-STANDING LAW SCHOOL:
Its Genesis, Development, and Functioning.

by Richard Wagner LICSW, Coordinator of Counseling Services, William Mitchell College of Law

In 1990, William Mitchell College of Law, a free standing law school located in St. Paul ,Minnesota established a counseling clinic to address the psychological needs of its students. William Mitchell College of Law has a student population of 1050 students (in 1994-95) and is located in a residential area near metropolitan St. Paul. It is "free standing", meaning that it is not affiliated with a university. Unlike the situation in some university-based schools, students do not have access to a student counseling service.

The idea for such a clinic was born out of the needs of the students. Two students who had previously been social workers returned to school to pursue law degrees. They were impressed by the frequency of emotional distress among their classmates and the lack of institutional support for this stress. Spontaneous discussions developed in the library or after classes. Students spoke of their lack of sleep, their fears of tests or speaking in class. Relationships seemed particularly vulnerable during this time. Some students sought out these former social workers for advise. Equipped with their prior professional experience, these two students, then about to graduate from law school, noted that their classmate's emotional state's sounded remarkably similar to symptoms described by clients in a clinical setting. The establishment of a counseling center could address and hopefully alleviate the pressures and stresses that appeared to affect many students.

The first step in establishing a counseling service was to move from these informal observations to a formal inquiry as to whether a need for such a service actually existed among the students. A survey was developed over time by these social workers turned lawyers. They sought input from numerous sources, including those knowledgeable on survey design and statistics. The survey, completed by 517 students (approximately a 50% return rate), was aimed at determining "students views regarding the need for an informational type/referral/counseling service" at the law school and "the types of services which might be desirable".

Once the survey's were completed the data was analyzed by a psychologist proficient in statistical analysis.
The results of the survey are summarized:
1. 50 % of the students responding indicated they would use counseling if it were available.
2. 69% of those who would use the service said they would pay or donate money for such a service.
3. 53% indicated that they wanted the service located on campus and 28% wanted the center located within walking distance of the campus.

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4. Only 44 of the 241 students indicating an interest in using such a service indicated they would use it more than 5 times in a school year.
This survey documented both the need for counseling and that counseling services would be used if they were available.
Equipped with this data, a decision was made by these lawyers to form an advisory committee to further pursue the possibility of establishing a counseling service. This committee was composed of the Dean of Students of William Mitchell, administrators, attorneys (who were former graduates of Wm Mitchell College of Law), a judge and mental health professionals . The composition was chosen carefully to address the concerns of the students and school administration . The committee's goal was also to determine what was the best model for delivering counseling services. This group met on a regular basis in the initial stages and on an "as needed" basis as other stages developed. The role of the committee changed with the changing demands for research, to conceptualizing how a counseling service would actually function, to making proposals to the school to serving in an advisory capacity once the counseling service was established.

Eventually, after much discussion, proposals and refinements, the administration agreed to the establishment of "Counseling Services of William Mitchell College of Law". The center began its operation in September 1991. The budget was $25,000 for the academic year, this amount funded by the school. This service was located on campus. Four licensed clinicians were selected to provide counseling, one of whom was the coordinator of the center. They were chosen because of their clinical experience and reputation. They also possessed a mix of qualities that would be helpful in establishing a credibility on campus; Of the four, 2 were men, 2 women, 2 of whom were psychologists, and 2 social workers. As to ethnic composition, two were African-American, and two Caucasian. The clinicians were not hired by the school but paid as independent contractors, thereby obviating the need to provide benefits and reducing costs. The clinicians were willing to work for fees lower than the customary hourly rates. All clinicians were required to carry adequate malpractice insurance. The counseling provided would be short term, limited to 6 to 10 sessions.

The initial goals of Counseling Services were to first, make itself visible to the students, faculty and staff of the law school, and second to be at the same time accessible and confidential to students. Toward these ends the staff performed a number of internal public relations tasks aimed at making all students, staff and faculty know of the existence of Counseling Services. They developed a brochure describing the program, its staff and the type of concerns for which those connected to the school would contact the service. These were then distributed to the students during the beginning of classes along with a brief announcement by one of the counselors (giving students a chance to familiarize themselves with the counselors). An open house publicizing the center was held and local merchants contributed food and flowers for the occasion. The coordinator of the center attended staff meetings and described the services, giving advice on who would likely use the service and how to refer these people.

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Confidentiality was a key concern of students and it was important to assure them that while the college funded the service, provided it with space, and helped oversee its operation, all information shared with a counselor was strictly confidential, even if school problems were involved. In addition, involvement in provision of a counseling service caused the school to engage in a dialogue with the Minnesota Supreme Court regarding the Bar Association rule that applicants would be questioned as to any history of counseling. As a result, this question was dropped in 1994.

The Advisory Board, based on knowledge of other similar efforts, predicted that few students would use the service at first. However, the first client appeared during the first week of operation, and during the first year of operation the center saw 36 clients, approximately 3% of the student population. This meant that between outreach and startup activities and counseling appointments, virtually all contracted hours were utilized. The original Advisory Board had anticipated that a fully operational Service would be used by 3% to 6% of the student population.

In the second year of operation The numbers of students using the service grew to 43 or 4% of the student population. The service, which previously had been free of charge to the clients, now cost $10.00 per session, after the initial appointment, to supplement the subsidy of the school. Not one objection to this change was voiced by the clients. A continual logistical tension existed, and continues to exist, between cultivating referrals and making time available to see those referrals. A pattern has developed over the semesters where the earlier weeks are spent making the center more visible to the larger student population. In the later weeks of the semester, when the stress and demand for clinical hours is higher, staff time is spent in counseling individuals and couples.

The counselors came to a better understanding of the problems specific to law students. This was very important because most counselors have little or no experience with the law school environment and its impact on the students. In addition to direct counseling, more educational presentations were offered on topics relevant to students, such as "Coping with Test Anxiety" and "More Effective use of Your Brain". Faculty members invited the counselors in to discuss in general terms the issues facing the students. These educational offerings have helped over 200 students better understand the psychological pressures facing them and learn adaptive ways of coping with stress, and other problems. A psychologist at Counseling Services, based on his understanding of law students was able to compile a worksheet to help students deal with test anxiety.

In the third year of operation the number of people using the service remained the same as the previous year. This may suggest a leveling off of use by students at about 4-5% of the student population. While the service is available to students, staff and faculty the predominant use, by far, is by students. Some staff have used the service and no faculty, have sought counseling at the center. The credibility of Counseling Services was being established in several ways: With increased exposure and direct contact with students in

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counseling and in the classroom; with staff recognizing psychological pain in students and referring them; and with the faculty understanding student behavior and now having a place to refer these students. An additional benefit of Counseling Services is freeing up faculty time previously taken up by students emotional issues. Periodically, faculty would request informal consultation about issues with a particular student situation. Some cases required more long term counseling and were referred to clinicians in the community.

In August 1994, Counseling Services began its 4th year of operation. At this point, each of three clinicians have contracted to provide 4 hours per week, plus an additional administrative hour for the coordinator. After this many years of operation, several observations can be drawn about the use and impact of counseling services at the law school.

Counseling Services main function is as a clinical service to faculty, staff and, primarily, students. Most clinical hours available by the staff are well used. Data compiled from intake forms indicate that people have used the service for 4 main reasons (clients usually present with more than one concern): 1) 66% of clients request help for stress and anxiety; 2) , 60% of clients experience relationship difficulties; 3), 38% of clients experience academic and work concerns; and 4) 27% of clients are experiencing depression. Almost all contact with the center is prompted in some way, directly or indirectly by the additional stress and pressures of law school. A fairly predictable pattern exits where more students request counseling towards the end of the semester when they are experiencing more stress. At the beginning of the semester, with student demand less intense, Counselor are more apt to have time for educational presentations and consultations. Students hear about the service primarily through the brochures, class announcements and now other students.

The concerns for which student request counseling are of significant clinical relevance and cry out for more research. One wonders if Law school causes emotional distress or heightens existing or latent psychological distress. So far the data collected is not conclusive but suggests that law school contributes to ,if not out right, causes students psychological distress. If this proves to be the case, the providing of counseling my be not just a benefit offered by law schools but a responsibility.

Over the three plus years in operation, Counseling Services continues to provide primarily direct clinical care. However, another benefit offered are programs to students in an educational, non clinical format, this helps students become aware of the psychological stresses affecting them while they are in law school. An additional benefit of educational presentations to is an opportunity for the students to "look us over" and become familiar with the counseling staff without having to make a commitment to counseling. This makes the service more approachable

Student evaluations clearly reveal that counseling services has made a positive impact on the users. Of those responding to evaluation forms, 70% gave high ratings of the service they received . Almost all these students stated that they would refer others. The

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institutional acceptance and promotion of mental health in the legal community helps instill an ethic of openness to recognizing rather then hiding emotional distress.

William Mitchell College of Law has established a successful Counseling Service for its students. Projections of student use have been accurate, indicating that this very effective service can remain relatively inexpensive for the law school. Some students experience distress sufficient to affect their family life and their ability to learn, and will seek help through such a service if it is offered. The center has been available to the students and to those, such as faculty and fellow students, who see the need to refer a fellow student for counseling. In sum, counseling services appear to be a worthwhile and utilized program in the law school setting. For a modest cost a valuable service is provided to a variety of students.

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